

CHICKEN POX (varicella)

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

DESCRIPTION

A highly contagious disease caused by the varicella zoster virus. Symptoms are usually mild in children and may be more severe in adults. Chickenpox can affect all ages, but is most common in children. The greatest number of cases of chickenpox occurs in the late winter and spring.

Almost everyone gets the varicella vaccine or chickenpox by adulthood (more than 95% of Americans).

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Fever, tiredness, and general malaise
- Itchy, skin eruptions that appear almost anywhere on the body, including the scalp, trunk, and inside the mouth, nose, throat, or vagina. Blisters dry within 24 hours and form scabs in 4-5 days. New crops of blisters erupt every 3 to 4 days.

CAUSES

Infection with the varicella zoster virus. It is spread from person to person by airborne droplets or contact with a skin eruption on an infected person. Symptoms may appear 10 to 21 days after exposure. Chickenpox is contagious 1-2 days before the rash appears and until all blisters have formed scabs.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Weak immune system due to illness or medications such as long-term use of steroids
- Pregnancy
- Lack of history of chickenpox or varicella vaccination.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- All children and adults without evidence of immunity to varicella need two doses of the vaccine.
- Varicella zoster immune globulin (VZIG) can prevent or modify disease after exposure to someone with chickenpox. However, VZIG is only recommended for persons at high risk of developing severe disease and is determined between you and your provider.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

- Children usually recover in 7 to 10 days. Adults may take longer. Adults and persons with weak immune systems are more at risk for complications.
- A history of chickenpox is considered adequate evidence of immunity.
- After chickenpox runs its course, the virus sometimes remains dormant in the body (probably in the roots of nerves near the spinal cord). The same virus may cause shingles many years later.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Bacterial infection of chickenpox blisters. Scarring, if blisters become infected (rare).
- Pneumonia.
- Central nervous system complications (rare).
- Shingles many years later in adulthood (possibly).
- Every year there are approximately 5,000-9,000 hospitalizations and 100

deaths from chickenpox in the United States.

GENERAL MEASURES

- **ISOLATE YOURSELF:** Limit exposure to others until you speak with a healthcare provider.
- Stay confined to your room until the lesions are all scabbed over.
- Work with your RA to get meals brought to you in your room.
- Wear a mask when you have to be out of your room, such as to use a shared bathroom.
- Contact Transitional Programs, 536-2338, once diagnosed, for assistance with notifying instructors of your expected absence. Your nurse and provider can assist you with this. You should still contact each of your instructors to notify them of your confinement and make arrangements regarding completion of school work.
- Use cool-water soaks or cool-water compresses to reduce itching.
- Keep the patient as quiet and cool as possible; heat and sweat trigger itching.
- Keep the nails short to discourage scratching, which can lead to secondary infection or scarring.

MEDICATION

- Calamine lotion and Aveeno (oatmeal) baths may help relieve some of the itching.
- To reduce fever, use acetaminophen or ibuprofen. Never use aspirin, as it may contribute to the development of Reye's syndrome.
- An antiviral drug may be prescribed for persons who are more likely to develop serious disease.

DIET

Blisters in the mouth may make eating and drinking painful. Fluid intake is needed to prevent dehydration. Try Popsicles, cool drinks, and bland foods.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- You have symptoms of chickenpox. Call the Student Health Center and make an appointment to see a provider. Tell the scheduler you may have chickenpox so that you do not have to sit in the waiting room and possibly infect others.
- The individual with chickenpox seems extremely ill, is difficult to wake up or appears confused, has difficulty walking, has a stiff neck, is vomiting repeatedly, has difficulty breathing, or has a severe cough.
- You are pregnant or a person whose immune system has been weakened from disease or medication and are exposed to or develop chickenpox.

Student Health Center



WWW.SIU.EDU/~SHC

This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.